

Extricating the web of learning: The case for learning communities

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Abstract. This paper presents the findings of a study to explore the nature of web-based learning (WBL) from students' views in a university in New Zealand. The study is part of a bigger project conducted to understand the pedagogical, design, and implementation issues of WBL that promote successful and high quality teaching-learning. 37 students attending online classes of 10 lecturers at the School of Education in the university responded to a survey and interview as part of a review of existing WBL teaching-learning practices. Findings highlight the idea of building a learning community as key to facilitating learning online. This has implications for the future design and implementation of web-based courses in the context studied.

Keywords: Web-based Learning, learning community, student perspectives, university, New Zealand

Introduction

The Web-based learning (WBL) is rapidly gaining popularity as an alternative to traditional forms of higher education. In this paper, WBL is used interchangeably with the term online to describe formal, internet-based teaching and learning.

Research on WBL has made clear that simply providing students with access to the Internet is no guarantee that worthwhile learning will take place [1, 2]. Many researchers have argued for more integrated approaches which have the potential to redefine and transform fundamental aspects of web-based teaching and learning [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. For example, [7] maintained this does not happen by chance, nor by simply placing a student in front of computer and hoping something miraculous will happen at the screen.

One notion to support this call to re-examine online pedagogical issues is the explicit creation of learning communities as espoused by socialcultural perspectives of learning [8, 9, 10]. Communities are defined by [11] as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. Common values inherent among community members include a sense of connectedness, trust, interactivity, shared values and beliefs and common expectations. This paper reports findings suggesting that the explicit development of a learning community is central in developing successful WBL environments.

1. The Study